

A GLIMPSE OF PARADISE MANAS SANCTUARY

JAYA PARAMASIVAN





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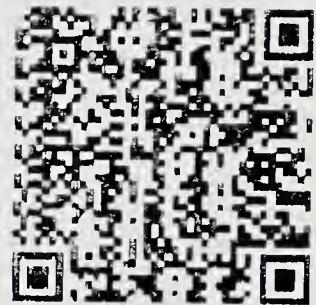
Manas Sanctuary

By

Jaya Paramasivan

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PREFACE

I had the privilege of spending more than two decades of my life in the bewitching North-Eastern Region endowed with rich flora and fauna. But Manas Sanctuary is a place just out of this world—it casts a hypnotic spell on whoever visits it. It is a paradise on earth. I never missed an opportunity of visiting it. With every visit, my fascination for it grew more and more. For a long time I wanted to share my feelings for Manas Sanctuary with children. I am grateful to Dr S.S. Shashi, Director, Publications Division for providing me that long awaited opportunity. Without his guidance and help this book would not have come out.

I thank my friends who helped me to acquire the photograph for the cover page. I also convey my grateful thanks to Mrs Bharati Narasimhan for her friendly assistance.

It is my earnest hope that this book will give our children an idea of the beauty and treasures of nature abounding in the Manas Sanctuary and encourage them to visit that “paradise on earth”.

JAYA PARAMASIVAN

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1. Scotland of the East

We anxiously scanned the milling crowd waiting outside the security enclosure, at the Borjhar airport. Suddenly Kartik, my brother, tugged at my arm.

“Look, there they are! Uncle Raja with Gopal and Valli.”

I looked in the direction he was pointing at, and saw them waving excitedly at us. We waved back.

“Wow! How tall they have grown!” I exclaimed.

“They will be saying the same thing about us, I bet,” grinned Kartik. He smoothed his slick dark hair down the neck. He looked neat and smart in his bright blue windcheater and well pressed denim trousers.

We picked up our baggage and moved towards them. Valli and Gopal were dressed alike in their denim pants and leather jackets over their shirts. Valli had her long hair in two plaits.

“Welcome! Welcome!” boomed Uncle Raja. He was as usual immaculately dressed in his three piece suit. We all hugged each other happily. We started chatting away to catch up with all the news of the four years since we had last met.

Uncle Raja was my father’s brother. He was working as Senior Forest Officer in the government and was stationed at Shillong. We cousins had always been very close, as we were of the same age. They occasionally visited us at Delhi for their holidays, but we were visiting them in Assam for the first time. We were naturally filled with anticipation of an exciting holiday.

We sped through the hill road leading up to Shillong. During our journey uphill, I could in the gathering darkness vaguely see the

changes in the species of trees. Pine trees and clusters of bamboo grew in abundance. Time passed quickly as we chatted all the way.

Soon we approached Shillong. The lights were twinkling at the distance in the dark like gems in a velvet case. I pulled down the glass pane of the window of the car and the cold pine scented fresh air rushed in.

“Hm-m-m-m,” breathed Gopal deeply. “Nothing like the cold mountain air! Do you feel it, Radha?”

“Yes.” I drew in my breath deeply. It was like an instant tonic. I felt rejuvenated.

Aunt Geeta welcomed us from the verandah of a beautiful large house, surrounded by pine trees and a lovely garden. She fussed over us as we sat near the fire place, where a cheerful fire was burning and sending welcoming warmth to our chilled bodies.

“Don’t you feel the difference in the whole atmosphere here after Delhi?” Aunt asked us while we were having dinner.

“Heavenly, Aunty.” I said closing my eyes in delight.

“Wow! The air is so clear and fresh. No dust at all,” beamed Kartik.

“Yes. This is a glorious place. But in the name of development we have had to sacrifice much of the forest area here too, and this place has its share of dust too these days,” Uncle Raja said and added, “Shillong was a much cleaner and quieter place, three or four decades ago. It was, in fact, known as the Scotland of the East. However, the basic beauty of this place still remains outside the city. Excuse me.” Uncle got up when the telephone rang in the next room.

He was back in a minute with his face beaming and said, "You are lucky folks! That was Dina Roy and he has invited all of you down there to Manas Sanctuary for a couple of days."

"Manas!" Screamed Valli and Gopal with delight. they both turned to us and said, "Oh! that place is just out of the world. You will love it."

"Aren't you both coming too?" Valli asked her parents.

Both Aunt and Uncle expressed their inability to join us and Uncle added that we had to leave at the crack of dawn the next morning by a matador van he had arranged for us, and advised us to take rest.

"Off to bed! we will have all the time in the world to chat when you return from your trip. Good night." Uncle Raja went off to sleep. Aunt Geeta at once started planning the food basket and other things we had to carry for our journey.

Valli and I went off to our room to sort out our things. Gopal and Kartik were still watching the T.V. and discussing about computers and electronics when I came out to wish them Good night.

"Hey boys, better get a bit of rest. You have a long drive down to Manas tomorrow." Aunt called out from her room.

Soon the house became quiet and we drifted off to sleep.

2. Off to the Plains

It was still dark and misty early next morning when we loaded the van. Kartik darted in at the last minute to pick up his shoulder bag.

“What have you got in there, man?” Gopal asked him curiously.

I was about to reply when Kartik quelled me with a look. It passed unnoticed by others as we were busy in saying goodbye to Aunt and Uncle.

The van sped through the hill roads in the cold misty January morning. We could hardly see anything of the scenery because of the mist. Soon we were driving through the plains of Guwahati.

“That is the mighty river Brahmaputra,” said Gopal as we approached the long bridge over the river. We could see a lot of water in the river even though it was the dry season. It looked magnificent with the early mist swirling above it. We passed through numerous villages tucked neatly away on both sides of the road. In front of the quaint looking bamboo houses built on top of wooden stilts, we could see tall betel-nut trees amidst banana plants. There were also mango and jack-fruit trees.

Gopal and Valli told us about the soil of Assam. Acres and acres of lush green paddy fields were spread across villages. We spent our time talking, laughing and eating the goodies Aunt Geeta had packed for us.

There was a change in the landscape, as we turned off the highway into a dusty road. The trees grew thicker and there were more of the dense undergrowth and thick creepers.

"Do you come here often?" asked Kartik holding a handkerchief to his nose to avoid the dust.

"Oh yes. Whenever we get the opportunity to visit Manas we jump at it. It is a paradise. Wait and see!" said Valli.

"I wonder! how can you folks like to live in a place far away from anywhere, where you have only trees, birds and animals for company?" exclaimed Kartik.

"Typical of a city bred brat!" I said to myself.

"Don't you get bored?" continued Kartik.

"Bored!" Gopal laughed, "We love the forest. You have to experience it to believe it," Valli joined him in the laughter.

I looked at them both. They looked so robust in health and were full of vitality and cheer. I looked at Kartik and down at myself. We both looked pale and frail in comparison. "May be because of the polluted air and water in the cities these days we are not that healthy looking," ran my thoughts. I sighed.

"We jog in the mornings. Radha, and we do a lot of trekking in the hills on holidays," said Gopal, as if reading my thoughts. "Shillong still has a clean atmosphere, because of its elevated position perhaps," he added.

"Look! Look! There is a jungle fowl," Valli pointed out to a bird which was strutting cheekily on the road in front of us. Its spotted plumes blended with the background of the bushes. In a trice it vanished into the bushes as the van passed it.

The forest road now became more dustier. The driver of the van requested us to roll up the glasses in the windows. We saw variety of tall thick trees.

Teak trees with broad leaves, covered with red dust, stood along with the tall sal and the red flowering silk cotton trees (Semul). We discovered that the fine dust particles had seeped into the van also. We became silent as talking became impossible because of the dust.

3. Matanguri Forest Bungalow

We arrived soon at Matanguri forest bungalow. It was a wooden structure on top of a small hill, right on the bank of the river Manas. We could hear a faint roar of water cascades in the distance. The van climbed up the hill and stopped near the steps leading up to the bungalow.

We saw a tall figure of a man standing at the door. We emerged from the van, covered with fine dust, looking like ghosts perhaps!

"Welcome. I'm Dina Roy," the man strode forward and shook hands with us. I studied him. He was lean, dark and handsome, his figure was lithe and muscular. He was wearing denim pants and a dark coloured jacket over his red shirt. My picture of a dowdy, sloppy and paunchy Forest Officer clad in a dreary khaki uniform vanished promptly. His whole face lit up when he smiled.

Gopal introduced us. "Come in. First have a good scrub and after that tea. Then before it gets dark, I would like to take you all upstream in the boat, to have a taste of the forest." He walked ahead of us and climbed another set of steps to show us our rooms.

I stood spellbound when we reached the top of the steps leading to our rooms. I saw the magnificent view of the mountain ranges in the far distance, and the river Manas looking almost blue, flowing serenely down below. The faint roar which we had been hearing was coming from the frothy rapids in the river. These rapids were splashes of white colour in the blue river, formed by the water striking the hidden boulders. The whole scene was breathtaking.

"Come on. You can see more of it later," Valli pulled my arm to lead me inside the room.

“Let’s get rid of the dust first. You or me?” She asked with a hand on the knob of the bathroom door. I looked at her long dust covered plaits looking like jute skeins and laughed.

“Obviously thy need is greater than mine.” I bowed, and pointed to my short hair.

“Thanks.” She swiftly darted in to have a wash. I whiled away my time to study the room. It was a small room with two beds and a wooden dresser. There was a window overlooking the river. A door connected it to the adjacent room. There was a hurricane lamp placed on top of the dresser which had a fly-blown mirror on it.

I went towards the connecting door to see what Kartik was doing and almost jumped when I saw him bursting in our room at that very moment.

“I say, this is ridiculous! There is no electricity, no shower in the bath.” He then lowered his voice and said, “God knows how fresh the water is in the buckets kept there!”

“Kartik! We are in the forest bungalow now,” I said. “Don’t you see how exciting it is to have it this way? How often we have longed to be in a place like this, quiet and serene.....”

“Shut up. But be practical. We should have basic needs.....” Before he could finish I broke in, “Of course you have Kartik. Just because you don’t have at least luxury items like showers and T.V. you grumble...” Before I could proceed further I heard Valli opening the bathroom door.

Kartik hurriedly turned to go back into his room.

“Any problems, Kartik?” she called out to him towelling her hair.

"No, nothing. He is just feeling a bit strange at this set-up...what lovely hair you have!" I laughed and changed the subject as she started combing her luxuriant hair.

I hurried through my bath. When we heard Gopal calling out to us we ran outside. I found Kartik looking clean and fresh sitting on the railings with the Walkman plugged to his ears and watching the view down below.

"Why don't you leave it behind?" I hissed in his ears. He scowled at me and turned away.

4. Ride upstream

“Come on boys and girls.” We saw Dina Roy down below waving at us. We jumped up and ran down the path to join him. I marvelled at the quietness of the place. Except for the muted roar of the river in the distance it was absolutely silent. While walking along the path leading down to the river, we heard an occasional twitter of a bird.

“That is the tourist bungalow,” Dina Roy pointed out to a building down the hill, a little distance away from our place.

“We get a lot of tourists from all over the world at this time of the year to watch the wildlife and enjoy fishing,” he said.

“Oh, By the way, I hope you are comfortable without electricity,” Dina Roy asked and added, “though we have a generator here we use it very sparingly. I prefer to have the bungalow furnished only with the bare essentials as it gives an unique setting to the place. Don’t you think so?” He looked at us to watch our reaction.

“I agree with you, Sir. When one comes away from the humdrum of city life, one likes to relax in peace and enjoy a completely different environment.” I enthused.

Kartik walking ahead of us appeared to be in deep concentration with the Walkman still plugged to his ears.

“Perhaps listening to the cacophonic music,” I thought to myself.

We reached the boat and climbed in. The boatmen seemed to be experts in guiding the boat upstream against the mild current. In the afternoon sunlight the river looked like molten gold. It was flowing quietly and languidly. I looked back at the receding bank.

Dina Roy pointed at some white spots in the rock faces and said, "Those are the natural salt patches. They are unknown as salt licks. They are sometimes found in the bark of the trees too. The animals are fond of taking a lick at it now and then."

"Just as we sprinkle salt in our food," laughed Gopal.

As we reached the midstream, we saw a herd of elephants taking a dip in the river further upstream.

"Oh! Look at them. Are they wild?" I clapped my hands in delight. They all laughed.

"Those are trained elephants. They carry tourists and officials through the forests," said Dina Roy.

Kartik was taking photographs of the animals with his camera.

"They seem to be enjoying it all so much." I squealed when I saw the biggest of them spraying a trunkful of water over its rider.

"There he is. That is Sabu," both Valli and Gopal excitedly pointed to the rider. The figure over the biggest tusker was giving the animal a vigorous scrub with a river stone, as it poured water over its back. Soon it rolled on its side and the rider jumped on to another animal.

Suddenly he saw us. He stared at us for a minute and waved his hands.

"Sabu! Sabu!" Valli and Gopal called out to him cupping their hands.

Dina Roy also waved and said to us, "Sabu is a wonderful boy, an excellent guide in the forest. His keen eyesight and hearing is an asset for us. But unfortunately he is dumb. He cannot speak. He was found near the river Sankosh by some forest guards.

Apparently his parents were killed when a rogue elephant trampled the hut they were in. Miraculously this boy who was hardly a year old then was unscathed. He was brought up by a childless mahout and his wife, here,” Dina Roy looked fondly at the agile figure of Sabu playing with the animal and continued, “We tried to give him education in the nearby town, but he felt very miserable and lonely there. So after a couple of years he was brought back. He feels he belongs here among forests and all the wild life. Now he takes care of the elephants.” We watched the receding figure of Sabu as the boat slowly approached the opposite bank.

Dina Roy said as he helped us out of the boat, “We are now in Bhutan. This river marks the boundary between India and Bhutan.” Kartik was the last to climb out. With his Walkman still plugged to his ears he gingerly held up his pants to avoid them getting dirty and followed us up the path. I held back till Kartik came up.

“Kartik, just take off those earphones please. Listen to the ethereal silence of these forests. Look at those birds coming home to roost. Soon you will hear their chatterings. Feel the forest trying to communicate with you in its vibrant manner.” I whispered to him when the others had moved on out of earshot. I shook his arm gently.

“What?” Kartik took off his earphones and grinned at me.

“Can’t you see how heavenly this place looks? Do put your Walkman away please,” I pleaded.

“Leave me alone, I will enjoy the holiday in my own way, Okay?” He said crossly and plugged the earphones back in his ears.

“Oh! What’s the use?” I said exasperatedly As I turned and walked fast to catch up with the rest.

The dry leaves and twigs under my feet crunched softly as I walked. I saw that most of the trees were deciduous with their leaves shed, but still they looked huge and magnificent with innumerable creepers entwined around their branches. There were many evergreen trees too with lots of green leaves. It was cool. There was a hushed silence except for an occasional rustling of the leaves and the sudden shrieks and chatters of the monkeys. We could see them swinging from tree to tree.

"Look up there, and see those monkeys," Dina Roy stopped under a tree and pointed up. We saw a family of monkeys climbing up the tree, higher and higher to the topmost branch to catch the last rays of the setting sun.

"That is the Golden Langur, one of the rarest species of monkeys in the world," said Dina Roy. We all stood there looking up fascinated at the monkeys. They were covered with long and soft fluffy fur of white and golden colour. The brightness of the colour increased with the light of the sunrays falling on them. The tiniest of them was riding on its mothers back and the whole family made a beautiful picture to see.

Kartik was taking photographs of them and I was glad to notice that he had shoved the Walkman into his shoulder bag.

We saw a few smaller species of monkeys suddenly running across our paths, and swiftly climbing up the trees, chattering excitedly all the while. Others perched on the tree answered to their chatters. We stood and watched them with amusement.

"Look at that," laughed Dina Roy.

"It is a lemur. We have many species of apes and lemurs. The golden Langur has a thick coat of fur in winter to stand the cold and in summer it is shed and replaced by a lighter coat," said Dina Roy.

We saw a mother monkey hurrying up the tree with a small infant monkey clutched to her chest.

“Oh! Look at her. Isn’t she cute?” I whispered.

“Yes. The mother never leaves the infant alone. When it is slightly older it carries it on its back. Monkeys have a very closely knit family. They are always seen in groups. The big male, the father, always has a group of females and children following him. They travel together. Though it is said that among all animals monkeys are closest to man, not all of them have superior intelligence,” informed Dina Roy.

We heard them chattering shrilly in excitement as we approached closer.

“They are highly strung creatures. They are sensitive to loud and sudden sounds. There is an instance of monkey in a zoo, which dropped dead at a sudden clap of thunder.”

“Oh, no!”

“How sad, Sir,” we all said with sympathy.

“Their shrieks and cry of alarm,” continued Dina Roy, “at the sight of tiger, leopard or other animals are well known, and are used by hunters to locate their game.”

“Who are their enemies, Sir?” Valli asked.

“Well, besides man, you may say, the larger beasts of prey—the panther is its chief enemy. The panther waits in hiding and rushes up the trees to seize its victim. The amazing speed at which a panther charges up a tree makes it a serious menace, even to so nimble a creature as a monkey! Even a sudden rush or sudden roar of a panther may send a monkey hurtling down its perch,” said Dina Roy.

"Poor things," we all said again in sympathy.

"The larger reptiles are also their foes," continued Dina Roy. "A python could seize and strangle a monkey in its massive coils and crocodiles too kill and eat them when they come down to drink water. Monkeys and apes recognise snakes, cobras, kraits etc. and instinctively dread them. But other wild animals are not scared of the reptiles."

"The poor creatures. Can't they defend themselves, Sir?" asked Kartik.

"Well developed vision and hearing, extreme alertness and agility are their best defence. They hide themselves behind heavy boughs or foliage or deliberately draw branches together to avoid being seen by their enemies. Yet, some monkeys when frightened have a curious way of dropping down from trees to sneak away silently through the undergrowth. This seems so unexplainable," said Dina Roy.

"Are they cowards then, generally?" asked Gopal.

"No. They attack in self defence or in defending their young. However, their individual reaction to an assault varies. One monkey attacked by a dog, covered its face with its hands and resigned itself to fate, but another set on the dog and mauled it."

"They are so funny, look at them chattering and swinging from tree to tree," Valli said.

"Yes," laughed Dina Roy, "a warning cry from any monkey will send the whole troop bolting, none stopping to discover the cause of the disturbance. No monkey has got the idea of using anything as a weapon. That is left to man. Being superior in intelligence he has devised ways and means of killing the largest number of his fellowmen in the shortest time!" said Dina Roy with a sad smile.

“Aren’t there any friends of the poor creatures, Sir?” I asked Dina Roy.

“Monkeys usually live on good terms with other wild grazers or the plant-eating wild animals. Deer and wild cattle gather under the trees on the branches of which monkeys perch for their food gathering, to eat the fruits and leaves which the latter wastefully drop. You can say that they not only live in harmony but are obliged to the monkeys for giving a warning cry the moment they spot a beast of prey, and thus help them to take flight.”

“We have seen monkey’s grooming each other by picking fleas and lice, Sir!!” said Gopal. “Are they really infested with vermin?”

Dina Roy laughed. “Oh no!—That is part of their inter communion. It is not lice and fleas they pick, as we commonly believe, it is the universal habit of fur picking. This diligent search is for nothing more than fragments of skin, skin secretion, and foreign matters. Monkeys are remarkably free of these vermin.”

“Many species of monkeys are hunted for their beautiful fur,” continued Dina Roy. “The Nilgiri Langur is one of such species. It is hunted for its rich black fur. This species has almost become extinct now.”

“How cruel it is to kill an animal for its skin,” moaned Valli.

“It is a sad thing that in his quest for lucre man becomes an exterminator of wild life,” said I.

“Honk! Honk!” We heard a loud horn-blast. I looked aghast, and turned to Dina Roy and asked incredulously, “What! a super bazaar bus here, Sir?”

They all laughed. “Oh, no! That is the Horn Bill. It does sound like a bus horn, doesn’t it? This is one of the myriad species of birds found in this sanctuary,” said Dina Roy and continued, “Any

scheme for the protection of wildlife would be incomplete without due provision for the protection of our birds. Quite apart from sentimental value, birds render incalculable service to men."

"How do they help men?" asked Valli curiously.

Dina Roy smiled and said, "While certain species may damage crops the benefits we derive from them is overwhelmingly large. Without the protection afforded by them our crops and orchards would be devoured or destroyed by hordes of ravaging insects."

"Wow!" exclaimed Gopal with admiration in his voice. "Nature does think of everything. Doesn't It?"

"Yes" agreed Dina Roy. "Birds are the principal agency that controls the bewildering multiplication of insect life; which if unchecked would overwhelm all life in this planet. Birds by reason of their predominating insect diet are an indispensable balancing force in nature. So we should appreciate their value and strive for their conservation."

We had returned slowly by now to the banks of the river. We could now see and hear thousands of birds roosting high up in the trees.

"Are these birds found only on the Bhutan side, Sir?" I asked.

"No. Manas sanctuary is a vast area covering both sides of the river and the flora and fauna are the same on both sides. Along with the resident birds you will find a lot of migratory ones at this time of the year. Some of them come all the way from Siberia and breed here."

Dusk was falling rapidly as we rowed back downstream. The elephants we had seen in the river earlier had gone and the river looked a shade of grey green in the twilight.

5. Project Tiger

The forest bungalow appeared quiet and charming with the lamps flickering in the rooms. We climbed up the slope and went up to our rooms. It was a novelty for us to see the subdued glow of the hurricane lamps and also to hear the wooden floors creak as we walked about.

I could see that Kartik was finding hard to get used to the semi darkness of the room from the way he peered into the corners and also from his insistence to carry both the lamps into the bathroom to see if the water in the buckets was clean.

There was a faint sound of a guitar being strummed. We hastily finished our wash and hurried down to the backyard from where the sound came. A huge campfire had been lit there. "Oh! Isn't it marvellous!" I exclaimed in joy as Valli and Gopal pulled us along to the place. There were a few chairs placed around the fire. The scene was romantic. Dina Roy sat on the ground strumming the guitar. He looked fresh in a blue jersey and white slacks. A couple of forest officials sat next to him. The fire burned cheerfully. It was a chilly evening and we stood near the welcoming warmth of the fire for a while listening to the music. Dina Roy stopped when he saw us. Kartik and Gopal dropped on the ground next to him and Valli and I sat on chairs opposite to him. There was more music as Kartik and Gopal also joined him.

We sat silently enjoying the magic moment. I watched the shadows thrown on the trees around us by the fire—gently swaying as if keeping time to the music. I breathed in deeply the cool clear air mingled with the aroma of the burning wood and the fragrance of wild flowers. The magical setting made one feel fully content and I felt myself drifting off drowsily.

Suddenly I felt someone quietly huddle down on the ground next to me. I opened my eyes and found in the glow of the fire, a young boy of our own age, covered with a rough shawl from head to his shoulders, sitting next to me. He turned and looked at me. I saw a most expressive and beautiful pair of eyes looking at me. They were fringed with thick eyelashes. His nose was small and sharp, and he had high cheek bones and small full lips.

As I studied his face he smiled. He had a set of beautiful white teeth. I smiled back. His face became radiant. We sat silently looking at each other for a moment. I felt Valli tugging at my arm, and when I turned towards her she whispered, "that is Sabu. Isn't he cute?"

I nodded. But when I looked back again he had disappeared into the shadows.

The music ended. We all clapped and just then the dinner was announced. Dina Roy looked at us and said with a smile, "Well, do you agree with me, that this place and its serenity is something very special and rare these days. I try my best to keep it this way to enable people to escape from the mad rush of the city life, and enjoy peace and comfort provided by nature. They would then realise what they have lost to gain modernisation."

We agreed with him heartily and felt happy that we were fortunate enough to enjoy Dina Roy's hospitality.

The dining room was lit with a couple of lamps and a few candles on the table. We looked at some of the beautiful blow-ups of tigers which hung on all sides of the walls. They looked real and alive in the subdued light of the lamps.

"How magnificent he looks!" I said with awe. We all picked up our plates of food and crowded round the photographs of the majestic looking animal.

“Sir, you are in charge of the ‘Project Tiger’. What is it?” Kartik asked Dina Roy.

Dina Roy went across to a series of photographs showing some lovely looking dense forests and said, “Assam and the North East region of our country is blessed by Nature with abundant evergreen forests, fertile lands and many rivers. In the name of progress there has been a gradual encroachment on the forests. Ruthless destruction of wildlife and prodigal wastage of natural resources have invariably preceded the establishment of modern industrial civilization. Thus the magnificent animal life of many tropical countries—not only of India—is driven into the retreats of fast diminishing forests and is threatened with extermination.”

We looked close at the magnificent photographs of the abundant rain forest with its thick foliage and gushing streams. “During the past,” said Dina Roy, “extensive and undisturbed primeval forests gave safe shelter to wildlife and ensured their survival. But the pressure of growing population on the forests and wastelands and construction of new roads through these areas to meet the requirement of rapid transport system have considerably eroded our forest areas. Moreover forests are cleared to set up new industries. The shrinking of forests have disastrous effect on our wild life.”

“Can nothing be done to stop this ravage?” I wondered aloud looking at Dina Roy with concern.

“Yes,” nodded Dina Roy, “our government is alive to the problem. Many species of animals, especially tigers and one horned rhino were on the verge of extinction. So some forests have been declared as protected areas and projects have been launched to save animals. At the moment there are sixteen such projects,” and looking at Kartik he said, “Project tiger is one of these.” Dina Roy paused and continued, “It may surprise you to know that even the

wild life in sea has not escaped the assaults of men. The whales and fur-bearing seals are killed without any compunction."

"Such killers should get capital punishment," interjected Valli indignantly.

"Yes, I agree with you," said Dina Roy and continued, "Mercifully, education has brought about a change in the outlook of the people. They decry the wanton destruction of wild life."

"Why do people kill tigers, Sir?" asked Gopal. "A dead tiger brings a lot of money to the killer. Its fat is valued as an aphrodisiac, and as a remedy for rheumatism. The 'lucky bones', i.e. the collar bones found loose in its lower neck muscles near the shoulder joint and the claws are precious charms and ornaments. The whiskers, it is said, are used as a 'love charm' or to brew poison which will rid one of an enemy! The liver, it is believed if eaten impart courage and the milk of tigress soothes ailment of eyes. The possession of beautiful fur of the cat family of which tiger is one, is an important status symbol."

"How could men destroy such a beautiful creature for such selfish desires, Sir?" I said with indignation. We looked at the magnificent photographs again with admiration and affection.

"Sir, over the centuries did no one think of protecting these animals? Are we waking up only now in this century, to the role of wildlife in maintaining the balance of nature, on this planet?" Kartik asked.

Dina Roy leaned against the sideboard and smiled at us. "Animals were looked upon as very sacred all over the world. The sacred books, folklores and legends bear testimony to that. Some 30 animals are mentioned by name in *Samhitas* and *Vedas*. Among them is the majestic elephant whose sanctity is enhanced by the belief that not only it is the favourite of Indra, the chief of *devatas*,

but eight of them guard the eight celestial points of the universe. Of course you know that *langur* or monkey is revered as Hanuman and the lion as an incarnation of Viṣṇu. The Goddess Durga rides the tiger. It finds mention in the *Vedas* too. The mongoose figures in *Mahabharata* as a teacher of wisdom to king Yudhisthira. The deer is always associated with Brahma, the Creator. Well one could go on and on citing references from the sacred books concerning the animal life in the country.” Dina Roy straightened up and said, “You will be surprised to know that the earliest known record of the measures taken for the protection of animal life were taken by Emperor Ashok in the 3rd century B.C. His fifth Pillar Edict mentions the game and fishery laws introduced by him.”

“Wow! How interesting, Sir!” We all exclaimed, astonished.

“Yes,” observed Dina Roy. This edict, gives the names of birds, beasts, fishes and even some insects, which were to be strictly preserved. It also banned the killing of certain mammals such as monkeys, bats, tigers, rhinos, barasingha, stags, Brahmini bulls etc. The Edict further ordained, ‘that forest must not be burned either for mischief or to destroy living creatures.’ This great Emperor had thought for the welfare of the future mankind!”

“But, Sir, nobody else seem to have sustained his efforts later?” Kartik persisted.

“Of course, centuries later, the Moghul emperors showed great interest in the animal life of the country. But Jehangir was the most outstanding. It is said of him that, had he been a head of a great natural history museum instead of being the Emperor of India, he would have been a better and happier man! His memoirs are a great asset to us,” said Dina Roy.

I looked at the photographs of other animals. “Are only tigers found here, Sir?” I asked Dina Roy.

"No. There are many other species of animals besides the tiger, such as wild buffaloes, wild elephants, wild boars, several species of deer, and even wild dogs and some rhinos are found here."

"You said that tigers belonged to the cat family, Sir! Do the tigers and domestic cats have the same habits and mannerisms?" asked Gopal.

"Yes. Cats big or small are members of the same family. The lions, tigers and leopards are the most dangerous of all the beasts of prey. They have the same combination of grace, strength and agility and that is the main characteristic of their family," said Dina Roy.

"Do they hunt only at night, Sir?" asked Valli.

"They usually hunt between dusk and dawn. They can see well at night too as do the house cats. Their eyes are the largest among all the carnivores. How long and prominent are the bristling whiskers of a cat! It has tufts of similar bristles in its forearms too. So do the other members of the cat family. Their sense of hearing is also very acute." Dina Roy looked around and asked. "Have you seen the cats' ears going upright on hearing the slightest of sounds? Tigers do the same. It is said that when hunting, a tiger relies on its sight and hearing and a dog on its sense of smell."

We saw a photograph of a tiger with its cubs looking so much like kittens.

"Are the tiger cubs just like kittens, Sir?" I asked.

"Yes. Very much alike. But the mother tiger trains them to hunt quite early. At a very early age the cubs begin to scrape off fragments of flesh from the prey the mother tiger brings home. It is their introduction to meat eating. Training in hunting and stalking

begins in nursery. The cubs crouch and leap at each other. The mother wags her tail to and fro urging the cubs to attack it. It is interesting to watch the cubs, attacking the flicking tail. It would seem to us an idle play but in this way they are unconsciously taught how to attack and catch a prey,” Dina Roy gave us an amused glance and continued, “Just as a mother guides her child to stand up and walk, these cubs are trained by their mothers too.”

He showed another photograph where a young tiger was crouched ready to spring. “When the young cub is old enough to stalk and kill, the mother sits away at a distance with an affected indifference, while the youngster ventures forth to catch its prey. How clumsy are their early efforts! But they all show considerable intelligence. They constantly observe the technique adopted by their elders and try to perfect their own hunting step by step. The strength of a tiger is remarkable,” continued Dina Roy, “It can drag a full grown bull a quarter of a mile over rough terrain. Its paws are very powerful. While pouncing on its prey, it can, with superb body co-ordination, press its entire weight into the paws and in the process its sharp and strong claws come out of their casing on their own.”

“How does a tiger become a maneater, Sir?” asked Valli.

“When one is incapacitated to hunt its usual prey due to old age or some injury such as gun shot or gums pricked by quills of a porcupine or wounds caused by traps set by men, it attacks human beings who are easier prey. Scarcity of its usual prey due to destruction of forests also drives it to attack men. Once the reluctance to attack human beings is overcome, a tiger includes human beings amongst its prey or becomes a habitual maneater,” said Dina Roy.

“How do you deal with the wounded tigers here, Sir?” asked Kartik.

"We usually have a tally of animals and can find out about the wounded ones, sometimes by watching the familiar pug marks on the ground. Once the pug marks are identified as that of a wounded tiger, we try to track it as soon as possible. And when it is sighted, we shoot a tranquilliser dart to immobilise it first and then attend to its wounds. We look after the wounded tigers here, and I am glad to say that the tiger population has increased considerably now and if you are lucky you may get to see one prowling about in the night," said Dina Roy with his eyes twinkling.

"How thrilling!" I exclaimed, but my heart started beating fast at the thought of stumbling on one in the darkness outside!

6. Smaller Beasts of Prey

We finished our dinner and moved along the wall and saw some more photographs of different species of animals. Some of them looked like magnificent dogs.

“These are the different species of animals found here. And look at these,” Dina Roy pointed to a group of photographs. “These are the smaller beasts of prey—wolves, jackals, fox, hyena etc. They belong to the dog family. Over the ages man has used them to his advantage. Perhaps the ancestry of our domestic dogs can be traced to some of these species. Besides having strong physical resemblance, they have similar temperament too. For instance, some dogs circle round before sitting down just as wolves do! Some dogs smile and wag their tails when they are pleased. Foxes do the same.”

We all laughed with amazement.

“Man used dogs to help him hunt because of their excellent sense of smell, by which he could track and kill animals. Do you know he used even cheetahs, known to be the fastest animal amongst the cat family, to help him hunt?” Dina Roy said.

“Whew! But are cheetahs found even now, Sir?” I asked with curiosity.

Dina Roy replied, “Unfortunately cheetahs, the fastest animal, are extinct now. It is said that some of our rulers here in India and also in Africa kept them chained in their palaces as pets, and took them with them when they went hunting to help them kill animals fast and sure; and then they were rewarded for their service with a bowl of fresh blood from the kill!”

"It is amazing, Sir, to see all these animals living together in forests, and each one having an individuality!" I said.

Dina Roy nodded and said, "Nature has provided each species with special features to defend and protect itself against its enemies. The deer family have lean, strong wiry legs to carry them fast from danger, the horse family besides having the fast running limbs have strong hoofs, too, to defend itself. Besides the fear of unknown, the only other feeling among the animals is the instinct of survival. Nature has provided only man with a superior brain. Animals generally have varying degrees of intelligence to adapt themselves to their environment. For instance," continued Dina Roy, "they do not know the meaning of death. There are instances when apes and monkeys are found carrying their dead infants for many many days after their death, till the carcasses become dry like mummies. May be, nature is kind to them that way."

Dina Roy looked at his watch and then smiled at us. "Well, we could go on and on for hours on this subject, but I am afraid you have to take some rest, to wake up early tomorrow morning for a ride in the boat down the Manas river. So, good night and I hope you have a good sleep."

We all thanked him for the interesting information he had given us and wished him good night. We slowly went up the stairs talking excitedly about the animal world.

"I wonder what the cricket score is," Kartik said suddenly when we were all preparing to get into bed.

"Hey! Don't tell me you are still thinking about the outer world after all this!" Gopal kidded him and punched Kartik good-naturedly. We all laughed. Kartik smiled wanly. But I could see that he was missing the T.V. and the radio.

7. The Eerie Wind

I woke up with a start to an eerie wailing sound coming from outside. I groped for Valli in the next bed. But she was not there. I sat up and looked round. She was standing near the window and peering outside.

“What is it?” I whispered fearfully.

“Relax. It is the wind which blows through the valley at this time of the year. It lasts for a couple of hours. Isn’t it strange the wind howling year after year only at this hour and at this time of the season?” mused Valli.

I got up from the bed and tiptoed into the next room. Kartik was trying to cover his head with a pillow to shut off the noise. I pulled it away from him and whispered, “Just listen silly, to the strange noise of the wind.”

Kartik only glared at me. But reluctantly got up when he saw Gopal standing near the window. I returned to my room. But after a while when I peeped into his room again I found Kartik glued to the window panes, whispering and asking Gopal questions. I went back to bed with a satisfied smile. I wanted to share every experience with Kartik. I was asleep soon but the wind still howled outside.

When I woke up again it was dawn, and there was no sign of Gopal and Valli. I woke up Kartik and urged him to get ready quickly and hurried through my toilet and bath.

When we came out we found Valli and Gopal climbing up the hill from the river side.

“Good morning!” They called out when they saw us. “We have just finished a short jogging by the river bank,” they said. I found them panting when they came closer.

"Woof!" Gopal and Valli let out a loud breath when they bounded up the last few yards and vanished straight into rooms to get ready for the morning's boating.

I shook my head in admiration at their vitality. I turned back again to admire the breath-taking view of the valley down below. The early morning mist was swirling over the river. Mountains were hazily visible through it and the rays of the morning sun on the landscape created a dreamlike atmosphere. The subdued roar of the river provided a background music to the innumerable calls of the birds. The forest was stirring to its morning life.

I looked at Kartik standing a few yards away from me. He had his Walkman plugged to his ears and was watching the scene around with a pair of binoculars. He was looking fresh and immaculate in his windcheater and denims.

"Morning!" We saw Dina Roy striding up the steps. We wished him and soon we stood there having tea and admiring the view of the valley from the front steps as well as enjoying the music of the forests.

I heard a faint noise by my side and turned to find Sabu standing near me. I could never forget the picture he made that morning. He was about my height. His body was lean and sinewy. His face was radiant with joy as he looked at me with his large expressive eyes. His thick curly hair was combed well and was glistening with oil. He was clad in a khaki trousers and white vest and a rough shawl was wrapped around his shoulders. He gave me a dazzling smile as he held out something to me.

"Is it for me?" I asked taking it from him. He nodded. It was a string of fresh wild flowers looking like jasmine and *champa* wrapped in a piece of plantain leaf.

“Oh! It is beautiful. Thank you, Sabu!” I smelled the heavenly fragrance of the flowers. “Beautiful. Jm...m...m.” I closed my eyes inhaling the lovely scent of the flowers. “Aha! It smells divine.”

“They do, Radha. These flowers are exotic and perhaps they have the additional fragrance in them as they grow here in the wilds.” I opened my eyes and saw that Valli had joined me.

Sabu held out another string of flowers to Valli. “Thank you, my pet.” Valli took it and after inhaling deeply the fragrance pinned it to her long plaits.

Sabu beamed at Valli. Valli patted his cheek. I clipped the flowers to my short hair with a clip and looked at Kartik and said, “Kartik, take a snap of all of us, please.”

Kartik, I could sense, was not taking to Sabu too well. He put his Walkman and binoculars reluctantly into his shoulder bag and took out his camera to take photographs.

Sabu then moved towards Dina Roy. “So, you have something else in there, eh?” Dina Roy asked him with a grin. Sabu nodded and went closer to Kartik. Kartik at once jumped away. Sabu stood still suddenly. I could see his puzzled look, but before anybody could notice it, Dina Roy had knelt down beside Sabu and put out his hands. Sabu smiled at him and pulled out a small bundle from underneath his shawl. He squated down next to Dina Roy and set the bundle down on the ground.

“It is a baby otter!” exclaimed Dina Roy. “So you found him in the morning near the river?” he asked Sabu.

Sabu nodded vigorously and pointed to the small animal on the ground and then towards us. Dina Roy turned to us. “Sabu wanted to show this baby otter to all of you and then let it safely back into the river, for it to join its family. Come closer, and have a look.”

We crowded near them and saw the cute little animal. It had a brown silky fur covering its long body and it was running clumsily with its webbed feet. It ran up and down Dina Roy's arms, its whiskers twitching as it looked at us curiously.

"How sweet it looks!" I tried to touch its body. It backed at once and again ran up and down Dina Roy's arms. Fondly looking at it, he said, "Otters live chiefly on fish. Look at the webbed feet of this otter. They enable it to swim in water. Watch its close coat of waterproof fur, the thick muscular tail and the bristling whiskers. It dives instantly after the fish. Its body formation enables it to twist and turn easily and follow the fleeing quarry."

"Tell us something more about the otters," I told Dina Roy.

"Otters live in a group and hunt for fish in the streams and the shallow parts of the river. It is interesting to watch their fishing party. They go in a group of about 30 to 40, in a huge semi circle, and drive the shoal of fish before them. Every now and then one of them dives and emerges with a fish in its jaws, and returns to its place in the advancing line. Very enterprising, isn't it?" laughed Dina Roy.

"Look at this one's whiskers!" I laughed and pointed to the otter's whiskers.

"They don't droop when they are wet. They are the 'feelers' when they swim under water. Water blurs their vision. But the whiskers help them find the fishes hiding in the crevices or submerged rocks. They look so graceful when they glide through the water because of their long lithe body." Dina Roy picked up the otter carefully and gave it to Sabu. "Come on boy, go back to your family now."

Sabu held it gently and covered it with his shawl and grinned at us happily. Then he went down the hill in a fast trot to leave it back with its family.

“Well, come on, time to make a move,” Dina Roy started walking down the slope at a brisk pace towards the river. We followed him. I slowed down when I found Kartik behind me.

“Why are you so rude to the poor boy, Kartik? Sabu is just dying for love and friendship. Please try to be kind to him,” I whispered.

“He stinks,” Kartik grimaced.

“Of course not! You are being nasty, that’s all,” I said indignantly.

“Of course he stinks and looks dirty,” Kartik deliberately repeated with his eyes flashing.

“You are impossible! You know very well it is not true. Stop behaving like a prig,” I said furiously and went ahead to join the rest of the group.

We soon forgot the heated exchange in the excitement of going down the river in the small boats.

8. The Exhilarating Rapids

The boatmen were experts, guiding the little boats over the rapids. It was exhilarating. The boat went over the rapids at a great speed. These patches of rapids were spaced at more or less regular intervals in the river, otherwise flowing serenely. We were able to see the bed of the river as the water was crystal clear. It was very cold to touch.

"Look at those pebbles at the bottom," Valli pointed down the river. There were pebbles of various shapes and colours lying on the sandy bottom of the river.

"Amazing," I said, peering down and dipped my fingers in the cold water of the river.

"Oops!" "Aah"! We all exclaimed in ecstasy whenever the boat sped over the rapids at great speed. It was a novel and exciting experience for all of us.

"It is a hair-raising experience like riding pillion on Kartik's moped!" I squealed.

Kartik threw a handful of cold water at me in mock anger. We all hooted with laughter.

Dina Roy pointed to a flock of birds gathered in the opposite bank of the river. There were hundreds of them. We held our binoculars to our eyes to have a closer view.

"There are so many varieties of residential as well as migratory birds in this sanctuary. Horn bills, orioles, pittas, kingfishers, minirets, spoonbills, bulbuls, warblers, herons, storks, owls, oh! the list is enormous," said Dina Roy.

We saw some birds in a flock flying and forming patterns in the sky with needle point reflexes. Another flock of birds took off

with a flutter of wings for another resting place. We saw some fledgling water birds too.

“Where do the migratory birds come from, Sir?” I asked curiously.

“Most of these migratory birds come here from far away places like Siberia, flying over mountains, rivers and continents, every year at this part of the year, to winter and breed,” said Dina Roy.

“How do they decide to fly here all the way from such far away places, Sir?” asked Gopal.

“That is the marvel of nature. Pure instinct perhaps, prompts them to these actions. Isn’t it wonderful?” said Dina Roy with admiration in his voice.

“There must be hundreds of nests of these birds here, Sir?” asked Kartik.

“Yes”, said Dina Roy as we continued to watch the myriad birds flocking the river bank. “A bird’s life is a big transition from a helpless blind nestling to a mature bird with powers of flight and song, feeding skills, wariness against enemies, and all the perfected endowment of being a bird. Have you ever watched the birds brooding over their eggs?” asked Dina Roy after a pause.

“Yes,” Sir, sometime when we went bird watching in Delhi,” I said.

“It is touching to see the birds feeding and tending their offsprings. With the same care they protect their eggs from the animals and birds of prey. They turn them regularly everyday to make sure that they are evenly warmed. As soon as the fledglings are hatched,” said Dina Roy, “the mother removes all the egg shells, dirt and muss from the nest. And like a busy housewife keeps the

nest clean and feeds the newborns tirelessly. Sometimes the father bird helps the mother bird feed the youngsters. When the fledglings are ripe for flying they coax them to fly."

"How do they protect them from acute heat and heavy rains, Sir?" asked Gopal.

"They sometimes," said Dina Roy as we listened to him with great interest, "perch on the rims of their nests, with outstretched wings, to shield their babies from sun or rain. They teach them when and how to guard themselves from the enemy by acquainting them with the warning cries and commotion created by other birds when the enemy is at hand."

"How do they learn their different types of songs, Sir? Is that also instinctive?" asked Valli.

"No. A fledgling does not naturally know how to sing a song unlike a little snake which naturally knows how to coil and strike. It picks it up as part of the adventure of childhood and learns from what its seniors sing. This was proved when we experimented with a fledgling in a captivity. It could only feebly sing! Not so well as the birds brought up in their nests by their parents," said Dina Roy.

"A mother bird's attachment to her eggs is so strong," said Dina Roy, "that, if the eggs are taken away from a brooding gull, for instance, she would brood a ping pong ball, a match box, or almost any small object offered to her!"

"What a marvellous display of affection!" said Kartik with amazement.

"Yes. Parent birds' instinct to look after youngsters are so deep that they take themselves the responsibility of feeding and raising any abandoned waif or stray fledgling in their vicinity!" said Dina Roy smilingly.

So far we were going through reasonably calm waters, but again we came across a series of rapids. Screams of delight filled the atmosphere. I looked all around me with fascination. The mist had cleared. The blue sky above, its reflection in the river, the frothy white patches where the river went over the boulders, the white sandy banks cluttered with pebbles, patches of dry grass, and the dense woods beyond them, looked like a beautiful picture post card.

We saw more birds flying low over the river banks.

“Do you notice with what freedom and joy these birds fly about? Imagine them being subjected to merciless torture by men when they capture them for commercial purposes,” said Dina Roy.

“For instance, take the parrots, they sell in the market. You cannot even imagine in what a ghastly way they are captured. Several of them are first blinded with hot iron rods. Before they die they are let loose in the forest. The poachers hide themselves. The birds’ piteous cries attract the other flying birds who come down to investigate. These birds are trapped by the wicked poachers in the vast nets they throw over them. The torture doesn’t stop there. The captured birds are stuffed in bags and carried to towns to sell them. Hundreds of them die in the journey due to thirst and hunger. How can one be so cruel to these beautiful creatures just to earn some money!” Dina Roy said with acute sadness.

We looked at him in consternation. Valli said, “Yes Sir, it is very cruel and inhuman. Can’t anything be done to stop this?”

“If there is greater awareness of such cruelty among the people, perhaps we can save hundreds of birds!” sighed Dina Roy.

“We will set them all free if we come across any caged birds, Sir,” I said with intensity and the others agreed with me.

“I have always maintained that it is cruel to keep birds and animals caged in zoos. Given a chance, I will free all of them immediately,” said Dina Roy with emotion.

"I enforce very strict rules in this sanctuary. I do not allow picnics, transistors, loudspeakers here. How will you feel if the privacy of your home is violated with a lot of cacophonic noises. Similarly the forest species get alarmed at these intrusions. Perhaps because of these restrictions, the inhabitants of this sanctuary look particularly happy and at peace!" laughed Dina Roy. He sobered up and added, "I hope people visiting the sanctuaries would realize that the wild animals too need quiet and peace.

"Look at the *goonda*!" cried Gopal suddenly pointing out to a lonely majestic figure of wild buffalo standing in the grassy banks of the river. It looked quite regal and formidable with its sweeping wide horns. It slowly turned and looked at us. We could see it staring at us for a couple of moments. Then it lifted its front hoof and kicked up the dust.

"That is a signal of warning," said Dina Roy. Then it slowly turned and walked into the woods, perhaps to join its herd.

"What animal is this *goonda*, I asked curiously. "Why did he kick up the dust so fiercely."

"That is the leader of the group of wild buffaloes. It keeps guard of the main herd which would be grazing somewhere nearby. It is a general pattern among the plant-eaters. The winner of the fight between the two groups of buffaloes is treated as a leader and the vanquished either leaves the herd or moves with the herd as one of them," said Dina Roy.

"Let's get off at that bank and rest for a while. We will have lunch cooked there." Dina Roy gave instructions to the guards who were rowing the boats.

"Careful," Dina Roy warned us as we were about to step out of the boats, "these pebbles are covered with moss and are slippery, so wade carefully."

9. Picnic at the Riverside

We walked down the soft white sandy bank of the river. There were many pieces of drift-wood which the river had deposited. They were of different sizes and shapes and were very light in weight. Some of them bleached white and were half buried in the sand. We started collecting the beautiful sculptured pieces.

“Look at these pebbles embedded in this,” Gopal showed us a piece of drift-wood with the pebbles of different sizes embedded in it. It looked as if some craftsman had designed it carefully. It was indeed an unique piece.

“The force of water during the monsoons got them embedded into this piece of wood, while it came down the river from the mountain slopes,” explained Dina Roy.

We walked up to the grassy land. Except for the subdued roar of the rapids there was absolute silence there. The grass looked taller and more dense than what it appeared to be from the boat.

We collected some more rare species of drift-wood and slowly walked to the place where the forest guards were setting up a makeshift kitchen with the help of boulders.

I saw Sabu standing in the river with a fishing rod in his hand and trousers rolled up to his knees. Soon he pulled in a big fish, his sinewy muscles rippling beautifully in his efforts.

“Excellent Sabu,” Dina Roy clapped his hands in appreciation and Sabu looking mightily pleased grinned at us. He took the big fish to the guards after showing it to Dina Roy

“It is a trout. We have excellent fishes here, and they are very tasty too. Fishing is regulated here. We protect our fish too. We do

no 'allow fishing at all during certain months, to enable the fish to breed,'" said Dina Roy.

The aroma of food came wafting from the kitchen. Sabu distributed the cutlery and plates to all of us.

Suddenly, I saw Kartik get up and walk briskly towards the river with his plate and spoon.

"Oh! no! The finicky idiot," I thought to myself in despair.

Before we could shout a warning, Kartik who had stepped on the slippery pebbles in the river, lost his balance and almost crashed down. But swiftly the alert and agile Sabu jumped to his aid and held him in his arms.

We all laughed at Kartik. As I was nearest to him, I sprang up and went to him. I noticed with a shock, the look of intense dislike on his face as he struggled out of Sabu's arms. Poor Sabu! He looked puzzled, but still smiled at him good-naturedly and made signs to him to go back in the river carefully.

I felt bad. I looked around and found that fortunately the others had not noticed Kartik's expression.

"I can't stand that chap," muttered Kartik under his breath as he was passing by me. I controlled my anger and followed him silently. The others had already reached the makeshift kitchen. We soon sat down to enjoy the steaming hot lunch and the soft drinks we had brought with us.

After lunch, I noticed Dina Roy picking up all the caps of the opened bottles and putting them away in a paper bag. Similarly the forest guards too were carefully collecting the remnants of the cooked food, shreds of vegetables and scales of fish. The idea was to carry them back to be disposed off in the litter bin.

“If only, Sir, people are as thoughtful as you are, in the cities and towns, perhaps our rivers will be much cleaner too!” remarked Kartik.

Dina Roy laughed and said, “Yes, pollution in rivers is caused by sheer callousness of the people. If only the industries get its chemical wastes treated before letting it in the river and oceans, if people become aware of the dangers of pollution, and discipline themselves perhaps, as you say, we will have a healthier environment.”

“We happened to see thousands of dead fish at the Okhla barrage at Delhi, Sir. It was horrible,” I shuddered.

“Yes. It is indeed sad. But that is not the only place. It happens everywhere in the world. Marine life is destroyed by slow poisoning not only in rivers but in the sea also. A constant awareness of survival is called for, man while exploiting nature to gain his material wellbeing, has upset the ecological balance,” said Dina Roy.

We soon resumed our boat journey down the river. The rapids were now becoming fewer and far between. The river flowed smoothly and had turned to a deep blue green colour. It was quiet and serene except for an occasional call of a bird in the forest and the splashing of water from the oars.

We glided closer to the bank to a landing stage of sorts. Sabu was the first to jump off and helped us to get of the boat. Kartik neatly avoided him and grabbed Gopal’s hand who had jumped ahead of him.

We walked through the forest path and soon came to a forest road. A jeep was waiting for us there. The guards who had paddled the boats took leave and went back to the river.

We drove through the forest. The air was cool and humid. The sun was vanishing fast down the valley. It was impossible to make conversation because of the bumpy road.

Suddenly the jeep slowed down and came to a stop. Dina Roy who was sitting in the front seat drew our attention to the herd of spotted deers crossing the road. They looked so beautiful. The last of the few deers suddenly leapt gracefully into the forest.

"We give the right of way to the animals in the forest," said Dina Roy with a smile.

Soon we arrived at the forest bungalow. It had taken us almost six hours in the boat. We made the return journey by road in barely an hour!

As we stood admiring the twilight scene of the valley from the top of the steps leading to our rooms, Sabu made some signs to Dina Roy. "Yes, yes, Sabu. Take the elephants for their bath. We will see you in the morning."

Sabu turned and waved to us with a big grin and left.

"Sabu is devoted to all the animals especially to his elephants," said Valli with a smile.

10. Scavenger of the Forest

Strangely that evening Kartik did not speak about the T.V. and cricket at all. He and Gopal animatedly discussed about forests and fishing till the dinner time.

“What’s that!” we jumped on hearing a loud howl while going into the dining hall downstairs.

Dina Roy who was sitting there laughed, “Relax. That is the jackal. It is one of the dog tribe. Wolves and hyenas also belong to that tribe.”

“Does the hyena really laugh, Sir?” asked Kartik with curiosity.

“Hyena eats the left over carrion which is mostly bones. It is said that the hyena cannot hear, but their sense of smell is acute. When a hyena collects the bones to eat, or sees a heap of bones it goes into raptures and starts dancing round it with a peculiar bark which sounds like laughter from a distance. It is known as the scavenger of the forest. Its main rival is the vulture. But it is not a much of a menace to a hyena as it gathers food during the daytime, while a hyena hunts generally at night,” said Dina Roy.

We gathered more interesting information on animals from Dina Roy while talking to him over dinner. All along we were under the impression that the beasts of prey had to be exterminated. But after our talks with Dina Roy we realized that they too play an important role in maintaining the ecological balance.

“They control the population of various species, whose unchecked increase would adversely affect the balance of Nature,” said Dina Roy.

"Does it mean that the killing of the weaker animals by the beasts of prey, help nature maintain a check on their growth?" asked Valli.

"Why yes." smiled Dina Roy. "Otherwise we will have a disproportionately large number of grass-eaters and a diminishing population of animals of prey.

"Now I understand the importance of having the reserve forests for saving the tigers and lions," said Gopal smilingly.

I looked again with renewed interest at those imposing photographs of the majestic looking tigers. I developed a soft feeling for those animals of prey.

"Sleep well, and get up early tomorrow morning to be ready for the elephant ride through the forest," Dina Roy said. We went to our rooms after wishing him good night.

11. Elephant Ride

We slept soundly that night. Even if there was a fierce howling of the wind we were not aware of it!

We woke up at dawn and rushed through our toilet and went downstairs for our tea and breakfast.

“Light breakfast please, we have to ride on elephants, don’t make yourself heavier than what you are! Remember the poor elephant has to carry you.” Kartik kidded me as I was reaching out for another helping of cutlet.

“Very funny!” I made a face at him. Chpal laughed. “Poor elephant! That’s a joke!”

Valli smiled and asked me, “Is this your first ride on elephant?”

“Yes,” I said. “If you don’t count the fun rides we have had in the zoos and fairs.”

“Good morning!” greeted Dina Roy coming into the dining room. He looked around and smiled, “Ready? Well, shall we go? We will carry some light lunch. We can have it somewhere out in the forest.”

We whooped in delight and followed him. I grimaced at Kartik when I saw him slinging his bag containing his Walkman on his shoulder. He only scowled at me.

We walked down a short stretch towards a place where there stood a high platform built with wooden steps on the sides. Near it, under the shade of trees, there was a group of elephants of different sizes.

I noticed a small little calf, playfully walking between the moving legs of elder elephants and miraculously not getting hurt. It was only about three feet in height. A slightly older calf pushed the tiny tot towards the elders when it tried to move away a little, as if to say, "Stay with them junior, don't stray!"

"How cute it looks!" Valli and I stood there admiring it. Kartik and Gopal were taking photographs.

"It is a baby calf, only a couple of weeks old. Elephants are gregarious animals; and move around in families." Dina Roy said joining us.

We climbed to the top of the steps and stood on the platform waiting for the elephants to carry us into the forest. A huge tusker with two beautiful gleaming tusks came towards us, with Sabu sitting proudly on top of it. He poked the elephants gently with a small goad he had in his hand. The elephant edged closer to the platform.

It was almost twelve feet high. There was a padded seat strapped on its back with steel handles fixed for the riders to hold. We gingerly climbed on top of it, one by one. The seat was so broad that all the five of us fitted in it comfortably. A couple of forest guards followed us on another elephant.

We started moving. It was a lovely sensation to be riding an elephant. It swayed gently as it walked. We held on to the handles firmly. Sabu was sitting almost on top of its neck with great ease and was prodding the elephant gently with the goad from time to time to guide its way. It seemed to understand his silent orders in the form of a pressure of the goad.

12. In the midst of the Forest

We went along the road and came to a clearing on the side. The elephant turned and went into the clearing. There was a deep drop of about eight feet. We clung on to our seats as the elephant climbed down the ditch with sure and steady steps.

"Whew!" I gasped as I clung to the hand rails desperately afraid that I would slide down the front of the elephant. "The drop is nearly twelve feet," squeaked Kartik. Gopal and Valli too hung to the rails tightly. "We might break a bone or two for sure if we fall off!" Dina Roy laughed and said comfortingly, "The elephant is a very steady and sure-footed animal. It has never been known to have slipped while negotiating slopes and deep ditches or even moats. That is why it is an additional advantage to have elephants to carry you through the forests."

I looked around and found that the colour of the thick vegetation varied from green to brown. Where the sun rays pierced through the tall thick trees, the cool green foliage was speckled with golden spots. There were bushes in abundance and a myriad creepers clinged to the thick trunks and branches of the trees. Some of the creepers resembled snakes coiled round the branches.

It was very quiet except for a few birds twittering high up in the branches. The soft tread of the elephant on the carpet of dead leaves and twigs was the only other noise to be heard besides.

Suddenly the elephant stopped. Sabu sat quietly watching it. It curled its trunk around a small tree and broke it with an easy tug, like snapping a match stick, and carried it into its mouth, and started chewing it. Sabu turned back at us and grinned.

"There you are! The elephants cannot resist this sweet tasting *Khoir* tree. They relish it just as we relish betel-nuts or chewing gum," laughed Dina Roy.

We moved on again. The elephant strode with ease through the narrow path sometimes invisible because of the thick under-growth of fern and wild bushes.

Suddenly the elephants stopped again, and then with Sabu's gentle prodding with the goad, it veered to the side and proceeded in another direction.

Sabu turned and pointed something to Dina Roy and made vigorous signs with his hands.

"There seems to be some wasp hives in those bushes further up. So the elephant, so sensitive to such dangers, is avoiding that route," said Dina Roy.

"Is the sting of a wasp poisonous sir?" I asked.

"Its sting can be very painful and of course if you are stung by a large number of wasps at a time, you become unconscious with agonising pain. In such cases the wasps have to be removed physically as some of them remain stuck to the body with the sting," informed Dina Roy.

"How awful," shuddered Valli.

"It is said that if you lie down on the ground motionless when the wasps attack you, they fly away after a while. It is also said that they abhor fire and smoke. If there are too many hives around we have them removed by smoking the place," said Dina Roy

Sabu stopped the elephant after a while and pointed upwards towards the trees.

"Look at those gorgeous orchids!" exclaimed Dina Roy delightedly pointing to myriads of plants, some of them with flowers, clinging to the branches of the trees. We found hundreds of them.

“What a glorious feast for the eyes!” I cried out in delight.

“Magnificent!” exclaimed Valli. Kartik and Gopal were again busy taking photographs of these exotic plants.

There were some blooms in pink with mild yellow and white centres, cascading down the branches. Some were deep blue, some purple, some pure white and shell pink, and some were bright orange in colour.

“Oh, there are so many varieties!” I exclaimed in wonder, as we moved slowly closer to the trees to have a better look.

“Yes,” said Dina Roy. “The 15,000 odd species of orchids all over the world make them one of the large families of flowering plants. There are more varieties of flowers among the orchids than in any other plant family.”

Dina Roy reached for a flowering orchid plant above us and delicately held it in his hands. “Now, notice the common characteristics of each blossom.” We crowded closer to him to have a better look at the beautiful blossom. He continued, “It has three petals and three petal like sepals. One petal called the lip is larger than the rest

It always forms the lowest part of the flower and serves as a platform for pollinating insects.” We studied the blossom intently. He released the orchid plant gently. Dina Roy added, “There are about 480 species of orchids in this North East Region. They are the exotic Blue Vend, Dendrobium, Ladies slipper and so on. The climate here is just ideal for these plants.”

“Can’t we grow them in Delhi, Sir?” asked Kartik.

“People have tried to grow them at other places particularly the Ladies slipper, a variety which is very popular. But in the metropolitan cities, the efforts have not been very successful. To some extent they have been successfully grown in glass houses in

simulated climate. But still, the beauty of those flowers are not quite like the ones we have here in these natural surroundings,” said Dina Roy.

“We have a few in Shillong, Sir. Is it because being a hill station the climate there is much more conducive?” asked Gopal.

“Yes. But even there you have to give them proper care and attention just as you do with your pets,” smiled Dina Roy. Pointing to a branch and with a pride in his voice, he said, “Have a look at those bewildering range of flowers.”

Do you notice their curious shapes and rich colours? Isn’t it amazing that one orchid doesn’t look like another? No wonder then, that it is a precious plant. We are rich in orchids in this region. They grow in abundance in Arunachal Pradesh too,” he said with pride in his voice. Then he turned to us with a twinkle in his eyes. “Who likes Vanilla ice cream?” he asked

“Wow, we all do, of course, Sir,” we chorused. “Is it sold here, Sir?” I asked incredulously. He laughed and said, “Of course not. But when we eat Vanilla Ice cream we have a flavour of member of the orchid family, because vanilla plant from which the essence is made, is an orchid.”

“Imagine. We had no idea of it, Sir,” said Kartik.

“Is there any vandalism committed here, Sir, for these plants?” I asked.

“Fortunately not so much here. But in the slopes of the Himalayas, where again there are some very beautiful, exotic, varieties of orchids, there has been a lot of vandalism,” Dina Roy said with disgust. “The greed for quick money has led some people to indulge in removing large quantity of mosses and orchids and selling them in the metropolitan cities for so called interior decora-

tion. It is very very sad. I wish they would follow what the nature loving Japanese do."

"What is that, Sir?" I asked curiously. "Though they use flowers profusely, for decoration they are very much alive to the importance of natural regeneration. They see to it that if a plant is picked, another is planted immediately. But, sadly, here people take them only to throw them away after some time," said Dina Roy.

We looked with immense pleasure and awe at the myriad orchids and wondered how people could be so callous and destructive in handling such exotic beauty.

"Even the higher regions of Pindari Glacier have not been spared. The large quantities of collections made in polythene bags each year by some research groups, is too glaring to be overlooked. People should pause to ponder over the irreparable damage they are causing to plant life and the environment," Dina Roy said with deep emotion.

We looked around at the beautiful trees before proceeding further. They all appeared to be listening to our soft conversation in the still silence. Sabu who was looking at the ground now and then suddenly pointed something to Dina Roy.

"Pug marks of a tiger!" said Dina Roy softly.

We tensed with thrill. We moved on towards the open grass lands. The trees there were sparse but the undergrowth was thick.

"There," whispered Gopal and pointed at a far distance in the grasslands. We could see through the tall grass some spotted deers and a group of antlers grazing peacefully. They looked up at our direction suddenly, and sensing our presence, galloped off into the forest further away, in a graceful leap.

Sabu suddenly became still. The elephants stopped moving too. Dina Roy pointed at something in front of us. There it was. A majestic looking full grown tiger, sitting under a tree, with its head turned towards us watching us curiously perhaps.

Its eyes were looking a bit sleepy. After a while it got up to its feet and moved further away into the jungle at a leisurely pace with super grace.

"It looks like a grown up cat!" whispered Kartik. "But much more graceful," said Gopal.

"Wow! How thrilling!" I let out the pent up breath which I had been holding all the while unconsciously.

"Sir, are the deer not scared, to graze so close to the tiger?" asked Valli.

"The beasts of prey do not kill unless they are hungry. That is the law of the jungle. The plant-eaters seem to know it too. Usually a full grown tiger consumes about 10 kilos of meat per day. But sometimes it can devour half of buffalo in a single day. After one such heavy meal it can go without food for almost a week. So, the grazers sense the danger when the predators are around on a killing spree, sometimes by its distinct roars," informed Dina Roy.

We had proceeded further into the grasslands. Again the elephant stopped. Sabu silently signalled the other elephant to move forward and stand along with us. We watched intently with our hearts thumping. Through the grass we could see an indistinct shape. Suddenly it crashed towards us in a flurry accompanied with a harsh grunt. It was one horned Rhino charging at us from about twenty yards away. It stopped when it saw the two elephants standing together facing it. It stared for a while, turned and crashed back abruptly with a low grunt.

"Whew. I thought it was coming straight at us." I said shuddering.

"That is the one horned Rhino. It was grazing there with its calf. That is why it charged, trying to defend the little one. Usually they do not face two elephants together. That is the reason why we invariably employ elephants in pairs when the tourists are taken for ride in forest," said Dina Roy.

13. The Rogue Elephant

We crossed the tall grass expanse and once again came on the fringe of the dense forest. I looked at my watch. It was past eleven. In the excitement of the ride we never realised that we were on the elephant for nearly three hours.

We approached a wooden platform covered with a tin roof. "This is a viewing tower. Let's stop here for while. We can have our lunch here too," said Dina Roy.

The platform had steps on its sides and was about twelve feet from the ground. The elephant stopped just adjacent to it. One by one we all leapt on the platform. Wooden railings ran along all its sides. Sabu led both the elephants to the cool shades.

We walked to the far end of the platform and stood there gazing at the vast expanse of grassland with evergreen and deciduous trees in abundance. Through the binoculars we could see in a distance a herd of wild buffaloes grazing near a water hole.

We spent the next half an hour on our lunch and chatted about the great forest wealth.

"Let's walk into the forest a bit. Come". Dina Roy led us down the steps. We followed a narrow path. Our shoes crunched the twigs and the dried leaves. Dina Roy gave us the names of tall sturdy trees all around us.

A few curious monkeys scrambled across our path chattering excitedly. A forest squirrel flashed across to climb up a tree. A cuckoo poured out its flute like notes somewhere in a distance.

We walked under huge deciduous trees. Some of their branches were covered not with leaves, but with a multitude of bright red

flowers. "These are the *Semul* trees, or the silk cotton trees," said Dina Roy pointing at them.

"How do these flowering or fruit trees multiply in this forest, Sir?" asked Kartik.

"Well, by the process of pollination. The reproduction is generally done with the help of wind, insects and birds," Dina Roy explained.

"Look at these ferns. They too seem to have hundreds of varieties," I pointed to some rich green looking ferns. They were very soft and velvety to touch.

"Plants are so much a part of the world around us, that most of us scarcely think about them. But they are one of our greatest riches. All life on earth depend on them and therefore wanton destruction of forests should be stopped," said Dina Roy.

Trees are vital to maintain our ecological balance. Removal of tree cover loosens the soil leading to soil erosion." Dina Roy went on to explain in detail the necessity for maintaining the delicate balance in the ecological system.

As we walked on absorbed in listening to Dina Roy we were startled by the noise of an elephant approaching. We looked up alarmed. A forest guard had just arrived from the forest riding an elephant.

"Sir," he said climbing down the animal hurriedly. "Can you come to the range office now?"

"What's the matter?" asked Dina Roy walking up to him.

"There has been a report of a rogue elephant seen in the nearby forest, Sir...," he went on with his information. We could not hear the rest of the conversation from where we were standing. They

both stood there with their heads bent and talked for a while. Then the forest guard turned back to climb on the elephant.

"We will follow at once. Go ahead," called out Dina Roy as he came towards us.

We all spoke up excitedly.

"A rogue elephant ,Sir?"

"Here—Sir?"

"In this area, Sir?"

"Is it dangerous, Sir?"

We all spoke at the same time. Dina Roy put up his hands and said, "Hold on. Let's go back at once. I can tell you more after I check up with the range office. Come. We will take a shorter route to go back."

We hurried back to the platform and found Sabu, feeding the elephants with some wild leaves and fruits. He grinned at us when he saw us coming. "Come on, Sabu," said Dina Roy patting his shoulders. Let's go back quickly through the shorter route. I have to reach the range office fast." We all hurried up the steps to get on to the elephant. Sabu climbed up the tusker nimbly by holding to its trunk.

We went through the forest by a different route and soon reached the starting point. After all of us got off the elephant, Dina Roy boarded a jeep which was waiting for him. He waved to us and said, "Carry on to the forest bungalow. I will join you there as soon as I can."

"Thanks a lot, Sir." We all called out to him as we waved back. We waved to Sabu and started walking back to the forest bungalow, talking animatedly all the way.

A forest guard was standing near the steps leading up to the bungalow. When he saw Valli he called out, "Valliji, there is a message for you and Gopalji." He turned to Gopal and said, "Baruas have arrived and are staying at the tourist bungalow. They wanted you to meet them as soon as you returned."

Valli clapped her hands in delight. "Oh! How wonderful. When did they come?" Gopal turned to us and said, "They are our friends from Shillong. You must meet them. They are great fun."

The guard said, "They came in the morning. If you are ready now, the van is going that way and I can drop you there."

"Yes, let's go. We can return before Dina Roy comes back. Come on," Valli called to us excitedly.

I found that Kartik's face had suddenly become pale and he looked bothered. He quickly said, "You all go ahead. I will meet them later. Sorry, I have a very bad headache. Don't worry about me. Please go ahead," he urged us.

Valli and Gopal stared at him and hesitated. The guard looked at his watch and told Valli, "Valliji can you please hurry? I have to take the van back to the Range Office."

I guessed that Kartik was worried about something. I decided to stay back and take care of him. I turned to Valli and Gopal and said firmly, "Both of you go ahead. We will meet your friends later. I will stay back and keep Kartik company."

They were hesitant but when I pressed them they left for the tourist bungalow.

Sabu stood at the bottom of the steps looking puzzled as he saw Valli and Gopal race down towards the van. He smiled when they waved at him and started to climb up the steps.

“What is wrong, Kartik?” I asked with concern. His face was still pale and he shook his head. “Nothing serious really, Radha, But I wish you had gone off with them. I have to go back to the viewing tower before they all return.”

“What!” I said aghast. “Are you mad. You mean, to go inside the forest by yourself?” He nodded. He looked desperate.

“I have left my shoulder bag there,” he said miserably.

“But why didn’t you say so earlier? The forest guards could have helped us or we could have organised something.”

“Shut up. I didn’t want all of them to laugh at me. You know how important that bag is to me,” he wrung his hands looking agitated.

“Look. I am going now and I am confident of finding my way there. I will take the shorter route by which we came back. You know how good my sense of direction is?” said Kartik.

Before he could finish I interrupted, “But Kartik, this is not a city. It is a forest! I am sure you will get lost. Don’t be an idiot!” I wailed.

“Let’s not waste time. It is still bright and sunny. Please stay here. I will not be long,” he started climbing down the steps.

“Wait! Wait for me, Kartik, please. Let us see if someone is here to accompany us.” I desperately looked around. I ran inside the bungalow. But at that time of the day there was nobody around.

I remembered seeing Sabu coming up the steps. But there was no sign of him either. Kartik was already down the steps, and was going back the way we had come a short while ago, taking long strides.

I reached down the steps and caught up with him, "Hey! Wait. I will also go with you."

He pushed me back firmly. But I held on stubbornly, and in the end he shook his head in resignation.

14. An Ordeal

We walked fast on the road, leading to the clearing by which we had returned. There was not a soul in sight. Nor was there any sign of the elephants. Perhaps Sabu had taken them to the river bank I thought to myself..

The route was not as easy as it looked from the elephant back! It was full of thick brambles and vegetation. Kartik often looked round to get his bearings. My heart was thumping painfully more with fear than with the physical exertion.

We walked on in silence. The air was cool but humid. I felt the towering tall trees were full of concern for us and were trying to show it by an occasional rustling of their branches.

The undergrowth was thick and the path filled with dry leaves and broken twigs. I often looked round for fear of snakes or such creepie crawlies. I jumped when some nettles grazed my arm.

“Ouch!” I exclaimed in pain. I rubbed my arm and looked at Kartik and whispered, “Are you sure we came this way?”

“Shut up,” hissed Kartik. His face was full of concentration. There was no sign of fear or desperation. I felt a bit confident.

Kartik picked up a stout stick from the ground and started clearing the path. Slowly the forest began to come alive with the birds chirping in hundreds as they returned to their roosts. They sounded so far and high above us. Our feet went on crunching over dead twigs and leaves.

I felt in my pocket for my pen torch, which I was in the habit of carrying. “Well, it might come in handy,” I thought to myself. I looked at my watch. We had been walking for nearly an hour! Soon I realised with dismay that in the forest darkness sets in abruptly

after sunset. It was getting darker fast and we seemed to walk in circles.

The chirping of birds had stopped now. There was no sign of any monkeys, nor were their chatterings heard. A forest squirrel darted across, perhaps hurrying to its safe home in a tree's hole, I thought.

The elephant's path was not visible at all now. We could still see through the thick branches pale sky high above the tall trees.

The crickets in the bushes had started their cacophonic orchestra. In some thick foliage their chirping was ear-splitting while in some other there was absolute silence. I held on to Kartik's arm as we could hardly see each other now.

It was becoming gloomy, and the branches of the trees above were silhouetted dark against the sky. The sun had set perhaps, I thought with a gnawing fear. Suddenly Kartik stopped and turned towards foliage. I could see hundreds of glow-worms flying all over the place now.

I looked at the bushes, imagining a million invisible eyes peering at us. The images of wild dogs stalking us and a tiger crouching in the bushes ready to spring on us made me tremble.

“Eek!” I let out a muffled scream when I bumped into Kartik who had stopped suddenly. He turned his head this way and that way.

“Incredible! How could I miss my way?” He muttered and peered above and all around him. He swung again to his left and we started walking slowly again. I switched on the pen torch but it was of no use as we could hardly see a foot away from us.

I jumped again with fright. A flutter of wings almost touched my face. It was a bat. Almost at once I heard an owl hoot loudly in the tree above us.

"OO OO...OO...OO," a distant howl made me nervy. We were still floundering.

"Kartik. Let's go back," I said trembling. Kartik stopped. He swung the stick against a tree and said with frustration, "Radha, I think we are lost." His voice trembled. "I did not bargain for this early darkness in the forest," he said tremulously.

He turned towards the right and said dejectedly, "Let us try to go back then."

He went straight into a thick hedge, and struck at it with the stout stick in sheer frustration. Suddenly something buzzed past me. At the same time I heard Kartik screaming, "Ooh, Ooh, Ooh God." I felt something again whiz past me.

Cold fear clutched my heart. I realised with a shock that Kartik had hit a wasps' nest. He stumbled and howled "Oo, ooh." I went to him and held him with my both hands.

A lightening thought flashed across my mind. What Dina Roy had told us to do, when wasps attack.

"Lie down, Kartik. Lie down," I cried trying to hold the struggling Kartik back. Suddenly both of us tripped over a thick tree root. I felt I had fallen from a great height. We both plunged down into a narrow deep ditch. A sharp pain shot from my ankle and I felt that I had sprained it. Kartik lay whimpering beside me and suddenly lay still. I grew panicky and groped for his hand. It was cold and still.

"Kartik," I cried out in desperation. There was no reply. I felt the angry wasps flying above us. I chose not to move till they left.

I heard the crickets sing again shrilly and saw the glow-worms flying here and there.

"Kartik," I whispered again. There was dead silence. I slowly lifted my head. I could not see his face, but he was lying still. I hurriedly felt for his pulse, it was beating very slowly. He had fainted.

"Oh, God, what shall I do? How will any one know we are lost in this part of the forest?" Panic gripped me. I tried to move my foot but it was agonisingly painful.

Suddenly I heard something approaching the ditch. A crash of feet on the ground above. I looked up with paralysing fear and saw a huge tusker silhouetted against the sky above the ditch.

"It is the rogue elephant. Oh! Kartik," I screamed. I struggled to get up but my body refused to move. I saw with horror the trunk of the elephant sliding towards me, closer and closer.

"It is going to trample me," I thought when I saw it raising one of its legs.

I felt its trunk snaking down and closing around my waist. I screamed and screamed till everything went black.

15. Sabu's Courage

When I opened my eyes I could not make out where I was. A faint fragrance of sandal came wafting towards me. I felt for my head gingerly and tried to move my legs. I heard myself moan with pain.

I slowly looked around. I lay on a mat on the floor. A lamp hung from the ceiling threw dim light in the room. An incense stick burnt in one corner. The sandal fragrance emanated from that. In the dim light I could faintly see the latticed bamboo walls and the tin roofing. I slowly craned my neck to look for Kartik. He lay sprawled on another weed mat a little away. I could not see his face very well.

“Ooh.” I moaned loudly when I tried to get up.

“You are awake, my child,” a soft voice came from the shadow. I looked in that direction and found a middle aged woman coming towards me, clad in a white cotton saree. She wore it in the village fashion, across her breast and over her left shoulder. Her arms and her right shoulder were bare. She brought the lamp down and came closer to me.

“How do you feel, my child?” She asked peering down at me concernedly. I blinked my eyes.

“I am fine, but my leg hurts me.” I looked down at my right leg and found it was bound in a bandage.

“Don’t worry child, you had a sprain. You will be well by tonight,” she said.

“Who are you?” I asked.

“I am Sabu’s mother. Sabu heard you and your brother talking in front of the forest bungalow. Though he could not understand what you were saying, he could guess from Kartik’s agitated gestures that he had left something behind in the forest. He noticed then that the bag which was usually hanging on your brother’s shoulder was not there. So he went straight to the viewing tower to fetch it before taking the elephants to the river.

“While returning through the forest he heard your screams, and at once hurried in that direction. He was shocked to find you both down in a ditch. The place was thick with brambles and bushes. The elephant was reluctant to move further as the place was full of wasps’ nests. He couldn’t communicate with you, and so in desperation he took a risk of disturbing the wasps. He coaxed the elephant to carefully lift both of you on its back. In the meantime you had also fainted. Sabu decided to bring both of you here first as he found that your brother was badly stung by wasps and needed prompt attention. I had some herbal cures and immediately applied it to the wounds.” She finished telling me all that had happened.

“Let me see Kartik.” I crawled closer to his side. His whole face was red and puffed up, and his one eye was closed and swollen. I saw that he was awake and was trying to smile at me.

“I heard what Sabu’s mother said,” he whispered. His one open eye was glistening with tears.

Sabu’s mother sat next to him and said, “Relax *beta*, you will be absolutely alright by tomorrow. I have removed the bees and the sting will be less painful tomorrow.”

Kartik felt his face. The herbal paste which Sabu’s mother had applied to the stings stuck in his fingers. He looked at them strangely. I braced myself involuntarily for his usual outburst. But what happened next surprised me.

"Sabu," whispered Kartik, looking over my shoulder. I heard a faint noise behind me. I turned and saw Sabu standing near the doorway holding a shining brass vessel in his hands. His face was strained with concern. He came in quietly and placed the vessel near me, and with signs asked me to give it to Kartik. He seemed to sense that Kartik would not drink anything given by him!

"Sabu, come here my friend," whispered Kartik again. He beckoned to him to come closer. Sabu stood motionless for a second staring at him. Kartik tried to lift his head. Sabu's mother held his head. Sabu at once came closer and took the brass vessel containing hot milk, to give it to Kartik. Kartik took it gratefully and drank it. I could not believe my eyes. My heart was filled with peace and joy.

We thanked Sabu's mother profusely for the attention she had given us. She patted Kartik's head fondly and said, "What is there to be specially grateful for? We are all born to help each other in need, and to love each other. Come. I will go with you." She took his arm to support him and I held on to her other arm, and hobbled along with them.

The elephant was down in a kneeling position to enable us to get on top of it. Sabu slung Kartik's bag on his shoulder and we proceeded to move towards the forest bungalow.

16. A Revelation

When we reached the forest bungalow we found everyone standing outside the steps waiting anxiously for us. There were great shouts of joy and relief from all of them when they saw us coming.

Everyone overwhelmed us with anxious questions when we got off the elephant. Kartik held on to Sabu with one arm and had the other arm across his mother's shoulder.

"What madness made you go into the forest like that?" exclaimed Dina Roy when he saw us coming.

"If you had taken Sabu along with you, I would not have worried so much," Dina Roy added. His face looked strained with worry.

"Sir, we, ... O... sorry Sir. I..." I mumbled disjointedly.

Kartik said clearly and quietly, "Sir, it was all my fault." He took out the Walkman and camera from the shoulder bag and held them out towards Dina Roy. "Sir, these may look like any other Walkman and camera to you, but to me Sir, they are something very special. I regard these as very precious as these were my first ever prizes won in the Science Talent Competition held in our school. Though I have won many more prizes subsequently, these are held as very special by me as they were my first." He bent his head, "I am sorry, Sir, I have been a sentimental fool and caused you all so much tension."

"Of course not, Kartik." Dina Roy put an arm affectionately around his shoulders. "I admire your humility and modesty too. Amazing, you never mentioned even once that you had won these as prize."

However, I am happy, things have turned up well, thanks to Sabu's brave actions, and presence of mind," he patted Sabu's back affectionately and continued, "We will call in a doctor to have a peek at the abrasions when we reach Shillong. In the meantime I am sure the herbal paste itself will help it to heal."

After a lot of excited talk about the adventure Sabu and his mother left, with an assurance to meet us the next morning.

"By the way, sir, what about the rogue elephant you had gone to check about?" I asked Dina Roy suddenly remembering the haste in which he had to rush to the range office.

Dina Roy chuckled and said, "It was a great relief to know that the whole thing was a false alarm. Some villagers had panicked when they saw a lone elephant in their fields and raised an alarm. We had a thorough check up done and found that there was no cause for their fears."

The excitement of our adventure in the forest left us all thoroughly exhausted and we fell in deep slumber the moment our heads touched the pillows later in the evening.

17. The Earthly Paradise

Early next morning we woke up to an exhilarated shout from outside.

“Yahoo, Yahoo.”

Gopal, Valli and I jumped up and ran outside to the verandah. We saw to our amazement a radiant looking Kartik climbing up the hill slopes from the river side with Sabu following close behind. The whole scene had a dream-like quality—with thick fog swirling all around and the figures of Kartik and Sabu looming through them. Kartik gave us all a beaming grin and shouted, “Hey, folks, what fun it is to give a bath to the elephants. I joined Sabu in the morning. When I saw him taking the elephants to the river. Come on-join us, lets go again...”

Gopal and Valli followed them with a whoop of joy, and I darted back into the room to pick up a towel and noticed with a touch of happiness that Kartik had shoved his Walkman and earphones neatly into the suitcase.

I ran out to join the rest of the group looking forward to another joyous day in the earthly paradise—The Manas Sanctuary.



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